A

SERMON,

PREACHED IN THE

PARISH CHURCH OF SWINDERBY,

IN THE

COUNTY OF LINCOLN;

ON

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY the 8th, 1782;

BEING THE DAY APPOINTED

BY HIS MAJESTY's PROCLAMATION,

FOR A

GENERAL FAST.

By JOHN DISNEY, D.D. F.A.S.

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A

SERMON, &c.

EZEKIEL xviii. 31, and 32.

" Caſt away from you all your tranſgreſ-
" ſions, whereby ye have tranſgreſſed;
" and make you a new heart, and a new
" ſpirit; for why will ye die, O houſe
" of Iſrael?
" I have no pleaſure in the death of him
" that dieth, ſaith the Lord God;
" wherefore turn yourſelves, and live ye."

THE invitation and warning given by Almighty God to the Iſraelites, by his prophet Ezekiel, are highly deſerving our moſt ſerious attention. The people of Iſrael were given to the groſſeſt idolatry and vicious practice, notwithſtanding they were choſen of God to preſerve the Unity of the divine worſhip againſt the multitude of heathen deities. They were

warned not only by poſitive precepts, and the denunciation of puniſhment upon their repeated offences, but *invited* by friendly and perſuaſive argument and reaſoning. They were told that *the ſoul that ſinned, it ſhould die* *; that the robber, the murderer, the adulterer, the oppreſſor, the unjuſt, the idolater, the uſurer, *ſhould not live*, but that he ſhould *ſurely die*, and his *blood ſhould be upon him* †.---On the other hand, Iſaiah writeth to them in the language of a friend---*ſeek ye the Lord*, ſaith he, *while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forſake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon* ‡. And again Ezekiel writeth §, in the ſame chapter whence my text is taken,---*the righteouſneſs of the righteous ſhall be upon him, and the wickedneſs of the wicked ſhall be upon him. But if the wicked will turn from all his ſins that he hath committed, and keep all my ſtatutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he ſhall ſurely*

* Ezek. xviii. 4. † ib. x. 13. ‡ Iſaiah lv. 6, 7. § chap. xviii. 20, 22.

ſurely live, he ſhall not die. All his tranſgreſſions that he hath committed, they ſhall not be mentioned unto him: in his righteouſneſs that he hath done, he ſhall live. Have I any pleaſure at all that the wicked ſhould die, ſaith the Lord God; and not that he ſhould return from his ways and live?

In the words of the text, the deſtruction of the houſe or kingdom of Iſrael, is plainly ſet forth as the conſequence of their continuance in their many tranſgreſſions; and their preſervation is made to depend upon their having *a new heart*, and a new ſpirit; meaning, an attention to the works of God's commandments, inſtead of ſo much boaſted obſervance of rites and ceremonies; *and turning themſelves to the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith, which they ought to have done, and not to have left the other undone**. And again, elſewhere, national forgiveneſs is promiſed to the ſame people, in anſwer to the prayer of Solomon †, upon the ſame condition. *The Lord appeared to Solomon by night, and ſaid unto him,——If my people which are*

 called

* Matth. xxiii. 23. † 2 Chron. vii. 12, 15.

called by my name, ſhall humble themſelves, and pray, and ſeek my face, and turn from their wicked ways: then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their ſin, and will heal their land. Now mine eyes ſhall be open and mine ears attend unto the prayer that is made in this place. And be it obſerved here, that in order to make the *humbling themſelves*, the *praying to, and ſeeking* God, effectual to the *forgiveneſs of their ſins, and the healing of their land*,---the *turning from their wicked ways*, was an inſeparable and an indiſpenſible condition.

But in the ſecond verſe in the text, there is expreſſed an affectionate intereſt in, and regard for the welfare of the people of Iſrael, *I have no pleaſure in the death of him that dieth, ſaith the Lord.* And, to convince us, if poſſible, ſtill more, of the infinite goodneſs and mercy, of God, we are aſſured in the goſpel of St. Luke *, that *joy ſhall be in heaven over one ſinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine juſt perſons, which need no repentance.*

Now

* Chap. xv. 7.

Now theſe threatnings, and theſe promiſes of deliverance upon repentance and amendment, were made to a people ſo nearly circumſtanced like ourſelves in the general profligacy of manners, that we may truly ſay with St. Paul, *all theſe happened unto them for enſamples; and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he ſtandeth, take heed leſt he fall**.

Hence, if we perform, on our parts, the condition whereon the promiſes are made, we may have confidence that God will not forſake us, *upon whom the ends of the world are come*, i. e. who live in the latter days, in the goſpel-times, but that he will ſo ſtay the horrors and calamities of war, in ſuch meaſure, and by ſuch means, and in ſuch time, as to his infinite wiſdom ſhall ſeem good;---that he will moderate our correction, and that in the midſt of judgment he will remember mercy.---For though the wiſdom and juſtice of God lead him to *correct whom he loveth*, yet that corection

* 1 Cor. x. 11, 12.

is *even as a father* correcteth *the ſon, in whom he delighteth* *.---*He ſpareth* not *the rod*, becauſe he *hateth* not *his ſons*---but as he *loveth them*, ſo he *chaſteneth them betimes* †.---It may be for our greateſt good that *he ſhould cauſe us to paſs under the rod* ‡, but we may nevertheleſs be preſerved from entire deſtruction, and even ſuffered to riſe again, benefited by his fatherly chaſtiſements, by thoſe corrections, for which it becomes not us to arraign the goodneſs, or even the juſtice of God, either in reſpect to the mode, or degree of them.

It is happy for us that we are in no wiſe concerned in the immediate cauſe of the national miſeries which we now lament and ſenſibly feel. It is, nevertheleſs unavoidable in public concerns, that the innocent ſhall ſhare many evils in common with the guilty, ſo far as their effect is extended into ſociety at large. We have indeed long heard of a *woe unto the world becauſe of offences*; *for it muſt needs be that offences come*: but the *woe* is particularly and

* Prov. iii. 12. † Prov. xiii, 24. ‡ Ezek. xx. 37.

and more immediately threatened *unto them by whom the offence cometh* *.

Nevertheleſs, however juſtly we may excuſe ourſelves from being the *immediate* cauſe of, or agents in all or any of the preſent and threatened diſtreſſes of our country, we muſt not exculpate or excuſe ourſelves beyond the truth;---We muſt confeſs our ſhare in the provocation which has been given to Almighty God to viſit us for our manifold ſins, by engaging us in ſo unequal a war with almoſt every power in Europe, without one ally to divide the attention of our enemies, or to fight by our ſide againſt them. Human policy, in other ſtates, ſhould have prevented, one would have thought, this combination againſt our iſland which may ſo materially affect the balance of power in this quarter of the world, but it ſhould ſeem that either the injuſtice of our cauſe, or the inſolence of ſome part of our political conduct, have forfeited all claim to confidence and aſſiſtance. Our councils have been backward and unſatisfactory in redreſſing the injured

* Matt. xviii. 7. and Luke xvii. 1.

injured rights of our late fellow ſubjects and citizens; and conſiſtent and determined only in proſecuting the ſubjugation of an extent of empire which is found, from the independent ſpirit of the people, andtheir diſtance from the ſeat of government, too great for our graſp. Under theſe accumulated and unfortunate circumſtances, with reſpect to our political ſituation, let us endeavour to extract this good from our approaching calamities, and turn our attention, for a while, to our moral and religious character.---To repeat our humiliation and prayers to Almighty God, as we have done this day, in obedience to public authority, will ſtand in little ſtead towards averting the ſcourge of war and all its dreadful attendants, or towards protecting us from the great power of an hoſt of enemies united againſt us, if we take not hence with us, thorough repentant hearts for the evil of our ways, and keep not thoſe reſolutions, which, in the inſtant of devotion, we may now form of amendment. The prayers of an unrepentant ſinner amount to groſs hypocriſy, and increaſe his guilt. It is no better than to defy the power of heaven,

heaven, to provoke by ſuch diſſimulation, the juſt vengeance of an offended God.

It is not to be denied that iniquity has long abounded in our nation. Vice, profaneneſs, and immorality have dared the laws of God and man, with an effrontery unconcealed and unabaſhed. Our extended trade and commerce have of late years brought an influx of riches, which have only been ſpent in corrupting the morals of the people, or in luxuries, in which gratification is ſeldom conſiſtent with innocence. A profligate and unprincipled ſpirit, which levels all obligations of truth, honor, or common honeſty, hath broken in upon all ranks and orders of men. The *great*, in title and fortune, have not had the *greatneſs* to oppoſe its influence, and thereby honor the religion they profeſs, and ſave the freedom of that country whence they derive their diſtinction. Nor have the *poor* availed themſelves of that protection which their privacy and obſcurity more immediately afforded, but have been as forward as their ſuperiors in all the gratifications of licentiouſneſs and unmanly vice. The ſame bad ſpirit hath ſhewn itſelf, in various ſhapes,

to

to the hurt and prejudice of innocent perſons,---in the great effuſion of human blood, ---the waſte of the public treaſures,---the peremptory and overbearing refuſal of redreſs of all public grievances, not leſs ſenſibly felt, becauſe they are patiently borne. In the ſtiller and more humble walks of private life, the ſame baneful ſpirit hath influenced its thouſands, and its ten thouſands,---in an abandoned indulgence in all manner of vice, unamended by reproof,---in vain extravagance and expence,---in diſſipation, and the immoderate purſuit of pleaſure,---in drunkeneſs and gaming,---in unjuſt dealing, wherein frauds and falſehoods, and other indirect means have been ſo long practiſed as to be ſanctioned by cuſtom.

However dreadful a repreſentation this may be of the irreligious and iniquitous ſpirit and practices of our times, and of our country, I am not conſcious that I have over charged it;---I wiſh neither to heighten, nor to lower the picture;---it would ill become me willfully to do either. It may indeed be ſaid that we are not ſingular, and that the ſame melancholy appear-

ances

ances are general, and that the neighbouring countries with which we contend are no better than ourſelves,---but what comfort, or conſolation, or protection ariſes thence? we have enough to do, to take heed unto ourſelves, without carrying our obſervations into the conduct of foreign ſtates, before we have well examined and reformed what more nearly concerns us.

In the ſilent and ſequeſtered ſituation in which we of this congregation are placed, we need not carry our thoughts or reflections into deep political reaſoning,---but turn our attention, in good earneſt, upon our own peculiar ſituation, and to our own particular reformation and amendment,---to enter into our hearts, and there intimately to commune with ourſelves, and ſee how far all is right there, wherein we may have been wrong, and how we ſhall amend,---in other words,---we muſt *caſt out the beam that is in our own eye, before we can ſee clearly to caſt out the mote that is in our brother's eye* *.---That, if poſſible, we may, though a ſmall part of the great body of the people,

* Matt. vii. 5.

people, contribute our ſhare towards obtaining mercy from God,---deprecating the impending evils, and averting the dangers which threaten our country, as well from our councils at home, as from the ruin of our trade,---the invaſion of our coaſts, and the capture of various ſettlements threatened, and in part affected, by foreign force. By theſe means we may haply meet the delivering hand of Almighty God, who for the ſake of a very ſmall number of righteous, could that ſmall number have been found, would have ſpared even Sodom in the days of old ;--- *peradventure ten ſhould be found there*, ſaid Abraham. And the Lord ſaid, *I will not deſtroy it for ten's ſake* *.

Or, if we are a devoted people, who in the hateful attempt to ſubjugate a free people, ſhould hazard the loſs of that liberty which has been the wonted boaſt and bleſſing of our country, and ſhould be given up to ſevere correction, by the only power who is able to protect, and to ſet us free, and we ſhould not be heard in regard

* Gen. xviii. 32.

gard to the ſalvation of our country, let me call to your remembrance, the only ray of hope and conſolation which is yet held out to us in the gracious diſpenſation of Jeſus Chriſt. We there find that when this world ſhall have paſſed away, we are only anſwerable, before the throne and judgement ſeat of God, for our own perſonal ſins and offences which we ſhall have done in the body, ſo that altho' all the pious and zealous pains we may take towards the preſervation of our country ſhall fail us, and in the end of the conflict we ſhall fall a prey to any miſconduct in our councils, in our fleets, or armies,---to the injuſtice of our cauſe,---or to the jealouſy or reſentment of foreign power: We ſhall nevertheleſs have better ſecured the ſalvation of our own immortal ſouls, in the great day of account, before the juſt, but awful tribunal of God. We ſhall then receive the reward of our faithful obſervance of the ways of God's laws, and the works of his commandments, of our invariable perſeverance in our duty to him, and to our country in the hour of trial, and of our patient reſignation under all his diſpenſations,---of our upright diſcharge

charge of all thoſe duties which we owe to each other, in fair and honeſt dealings, in mutual aſſiſtance, as occaſion ſhall require, and in brotherly love one to another.

If we begin the exerciſe of theſe duties with a thorough ſincerity, and perſevere in them to the end of our lives,---the rewards, which are reſerved until the final judgment, for the faithful ſoldier and ſervant of Jeſus Chriſt, will aſſuredly be given to us according to our ſeveral deſerts. But in all our prayers for worldly bleſſings, whether general or perſonal, we muſt aſk for them only ſo far as the beſtowal of them ſhall be agreeable to the good providence of God, and they will accordingly be given unto, or witheld from us, as the infinite wiſdom of God ſhall ſee proper. For worldly bleſſings do not make any part of the reward promiſed to the faithful chriſtian, who is told that through much ſorrow and tribulation he ſhall enter into the joy of his Lord,---but are diſpenſed in the ordinary courſe of God's providence, according as they anſwer his ends in his dealings with men. He hath certainly *given us richly all things*

things to enjoy *, and in all the occurrences of human life, we have in our power the enjoyment of much happineſs, and the abatement of much ſorrow. If we ſet our affections on the paſſing pleaſures of the world,--- we ſhall want the command of our paſſions on the loſs of them;---If we court, or are led to the momentary and unſatisfactory gratifications of vice,---we muſt meet the conſequences, in the ſhape of remorſe, diſeaſe, or ruin;---If we tread the much beaten path of fraud and diſhoneſty, we muſt expect to be overtaken by the ſhame and confuſion which will attend our detection;---If we neglect the education of our children in good and virtuous principles, or in our own perſons ſet them bad examples,---we muſt, to that neglect, and to ſuch example, place the account of much of their miſconduct, and the probability that our own hoary heads ſhall be bowed down with ſorrow to the grave.---If then we purſue not that plain and ſtrait, tho' narrow and rugged, road which leadeth to life, it is vanity, hypocriſy, and mockery to pray

* 1 Tim. vi. 7.

to Almighty God for his bleſſings in this world, or to hope for his mercy in the next; and, if any thing can alter the fixed courſe of his government of the world, will draw down his vengeance upon us here, as well as riſe up to our greater condemnation hereafter.

Let not then this preſent aſſembling of ourſelves together in public worſhip and humiliation to Almighty God, paſs over unheaded and unregarded, as a matter of no further conſequence. Since we have gathered ourſelves together, in compliance with authority, let us not loſe ſight of the avowed end in view. And as we regularly aſſemble to communicate in acts of devotion, in prayer, and in hearing the word of God, on every Lord's day, let us not waſte the flying moments of human life, during the ſix intervening days, in a courſe of life or converſation, which may, in anywiſe, unfit us for a ſober and ſerious return to the public worſhip of our God.

Let me again and again deliver to you the faithful word of exhortation, in all truth and ſoberneſs. Let me entreat you, as you value your peace of mind, your reputation,

your

your welfare in this world, and above all, as you look forward to the prize of our high calling in Chriſt-Jeſus;---let me earneſtly pray you, in Chriſt's ſtead, to look circumſpectly into yourſelves, and watch narrowly your own conduct and behaviour; to examine your lives by the word of God, of which each of you may obtain ſufficient knowlege, if you will either read it yourſelves, or with attention hear it read by others;---to reform and amend what ſhall be found amiſs, without hazarding the delay of ſo neceſſary a work, ſeeing ye know not what will be the event of the cloſe of the preſent day.

Henceforward then, let the profane ſwearer reverence the hallowed name of God, and let not the tongue any more blaſpheme the name of him who gave it power to ſpeak;---rather *let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the uſe of edifying, that it may miniſter grace unto the hearers* *. Let the glutton, and the drunkard forſake the wallowing in beaſtly exceſs, ruinous to their

* Eph. iv. 29.

their religion, their morals, their health, their family, and let them walk in temperance and ſobriety. Let the lewd libertine ſtop the courſe of his irregular deſires, and return to virtue and modeſty, before diſeaſe and ſhame ſhall overtake him.--Let the ſlothful man caſt off the unmanly habit of idleneſs, and in exchange let him eat the ſweet, however homely, bread of honeſt induſtry.—Let him who has been unmindful of his childrens manners, or the cultivation of their minds, train them in habits which will inſpire them with fear and love of God, and accuſtom them to that induſtry which will preſerve their virtue, while it provides them with food and raiment. Let him teach them alſo to know that they are dependant and accountable beings, only ſojourning here in their way to a better country.---Let him who hath practiſed any unfair dealing, or any way injured, or oppreſſed, or defrauded another,---let any and all ſuch henceforward obſerve the golden rule, to do to others, as they would have others do to them.---Let him that hath *ſtolen, ſteal no more; but rather let him labour, working with*

with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth *.

Laſtly; let him that has attempted or adviſed to deſpoil his country of its liberties, its honour, and its wealth, and to haraſs a brave, a free, and an independent people with all the horrors of a civil war;---to ſtain a brother's hand with a brother's blood; to inſult and oppreſs a large and favoured continent of friends; to plant thorns and briars where lilies and roſes grew, and would have proſpered; to ſow the ſeeds of jealouſy and hatred, where reigned confidence and love; let him or them, whoe'er they be, ſtrenuouſly labour, with inſtant and unceaſing aſſiduity, to heal the breach they have made,--- to bind up the wounds,---to give health to two exhauſted countries,--- to acknowledge their errors and tranſgreſſions, that ſo they may now ſacrifice to the juſtice of a much injured and diſtracted empire, and that before the day of retribution, they may make their peace with God.

In a few words. *Behold God himſelf is the judge, fear him: leave off from your ſins, and*

* Eph. iv. 28.

*and forget your iniquities, to meddle no more with them for ever; ſo ſhall God lead you forth, and deliver you from all trouble.** And again, hear the warning of Iſaiah,— *Waſh ye, make ye clean, put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes, ceaſe to do evil, learn to do well, ſeek judgment, relieve the oppreſſed, judge the fatherleſs, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reaſon together, ſaith the Lord; though your ſins be as ſcarlet, they ſhall be as white as ſnow; though they be red like crimſon, they ſhall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye ſhall eat the good of the land. But if ye refuſe and rebel, ye ſhall be devoured with the ſword; for the mouth of the Lord hath ſpoken it.†* And the prophet Ezekiel, emphatically writes to the ſame purpoſe: *As for the wickedneſs of the wicked, he ſhall not fall thereby in the day that he turneth from his wickedneſs; neither ſhall the righteous be able to live for his righteouſneſs in the day that he ſinneth ‡.*

Theſe exhortations, however proper on the preſent occaſion, are never unſeaſonable; and happy would it be for us all, if no reaſon was given in future to repeat them.

The

* 2 Eſdras xvi. 67. † Iſaiah i. 16. 20. ‡ Ezek. xxxiii. 12.

The Bible, and the Bible only, which alone is the religion of Proteſtants, is the authority and rule of my diſcourſes to you, as far as I am competent to the right underſtanding of it; and if I am not warranted by that ſure word of God in what I ſay, ceaſe to believe me. It is my duty to expound to you the Book of Life, and neither my head, nor my heart are inclined to deceive you. Human life is ſhort;—day preſſes hard on day, and years roll on before we are aware that the thread of life is near run out, and that nature's call is at hand, if we do not ſooner fall by diſeaſe or accident. The uncertainty of our continuance here, ſhould be a leſſon of inſtruction eternally before us, knowing not at what hour we may be called hence, and that what ſhall be then undone, muſt for ever ſo remain; — the ſtouteſt heart may ſuddenly wax faint, and the young man, in the full vigour of health and ſtrength, may fall before to-morrow's ſun.

Finally then, let us awake, and be doing; work the work of our faith while the light of the day is yet upon us, leſt the night come on, when no man can work.

FINIS.

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